DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 457 CG 028 228

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TITLE African-American Females: A Theory of Educational Aspiration.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at Symposium on African Americans and Their Great Plains Experiences (Lincoln, NB, February 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aspiration; Adolescents; *Black Students; Educational Attainment; *Females; Goal Orientation; High Schools; Higher Education; Student Attitudes; *Student Educational Objectives
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; *Educational Goals Assessment

ABSTRACT

Although 76% of African-American students graduate from high school, only 25% of these graduates enter institutions of higher education. A systematic analysis of the aspirations among African-American females for post-high-school education was conducted. Initial portions of the study focused on characteristics of support in the areas of familial assistance, academic preparation, college and career counseling, and self image issues. African-American females (N=21), in either their junior or senior year of high school, participated in the study; a total of 76 interviews were conducted. Results indicate that aspiration is a difficult concept to define, being based in each young woman's experience and context. Some similarities, however, were apparent regarding the influence of role models, self-understanding, and participation in academic, college and career counseling services, or community activities. These similarities are encompassed in a theory of education aspiration which describes the influence of role models, the realization of selfhood, and the promotion of preparedness in understanding these women's educational goals. The participants made recommendations for educators, peers, parents, and community members for fostering African-American women's educational advancement. (Contains 45 references.) (RJM)

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Running head: AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALES

# African-American Females: A Theory of Educational Aspiration

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## Abstract

A qualitative research study of twenty-one African-American females during their junior and senior years in high school explored aspiration for higher education. Seventy-six interviews were conducted that led to a theory of educational aspiration which described the influence of role models, the realization of selfhood, and the promotion of preparedness. Recommendations were offered by the young women for educators, parents, peers, and community members.

# African-American Females:
# A Theory of Educational Aspiration

Demographic studies by the United States government illustrate that cultural diversity in the public school classroom is increasing (Hodgkinson, 1991). Current statistics state that high schools graduate approximately 76% of their African-American students while only one-fourth of these graduates enter institutions of higher education (American Council of Education, 1988; National Center for Education Statistics, 1991; Yeakey & Bennett, 1990). Additionally, an even smaller percentage of these students continue and ultimately complete their college education (Hodgkinson, 1985). Our schools fail to support, graduate, and adequately prepare most minority students for higher educational settings (Cargile & Woods, 1988; Jenkins, 1990; Wharton, 1986). Little is known regarding the proportionately small percentage of African-American enrollees in higher education. Hodgkinson (1985) outlines a decrease in financial aid, lack of relationship between an academic degree and a good job, and inadequate high school counseling as contributing factors.

Demographic research depicts an increase of minority students within the classroom and minority adults within the workplace (Benard, 1988; Hodgkinson, 1991). Hodgkinson (1985) explains that the classrooms of America are becoming diverse in population, and, without the success of minority students, productivity and prosperity for all citizens will be decreased. This critical dilemma continues to be experienced throughout our educational system and society and leads to educational failure, absence of opportunity, and lack of success (Benard, 1988).

Educational research (Bank, Slavings, & Biddle, 1990; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Mickelson, 1990) explores factors of attitude, achievement, and programming for minority youth, yet fails to address the success or failure of African-American females. Research studies identify factors of influence, persistence, self image, and curriculum or services adaptation as contributing to the achievement of minority students in high school or college (Bank et al., 1990; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Sedlack & Webster; 1978).

Murray (1982) reviews the literature regarding African-American females and concludes that research "lacked conceptual focus" that would integrate or clarify issues informing educational policies, practices, and procedures. This dilemma particularly describes the reality of African-

American women who head almost half of all minority households (Hodgkinson, 1985; National Center for Education Statistics, 1991; Yeakey & Bennett, 1990), who persist in the lowest paying jobs (Benard, 1988), and as members of society are said to perpetuate the cycle of poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991).

The influence of role models, self image, and academic achievement has been explored regarding the educational choice and retention of students (Bank et al., 1990; Brown, 1993; Cargile & Woods, 1988; Credle & Dean, 1991; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Harris, 1992; Mickelson, 1990; Sedlack & Webster, 1978). Role models possessed a pivotal influence on the aspirations and decision making processes of African-American females (Bank et al., 1990; Brown, 1993; Dawkins, 1989; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; McAdoo, 1988; Rodgers-Rose, 1980; Turner, 1983). Groups of individuals classified as role models are delineated within three groups: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Primary role models, parents or significant others within the family, possessed significant influence on aspirations for education, occupation, and value orientation. Mothers or maternal guardians were selected most often as the primary role model (Beale, 1970; Brown, 1993; Dawkins, 1989; McAdoo, 1988; McCray, 1980; Turner, 1983). Parents, by their instruction, influenced educational aspiration (Bank et al., 1990). Additionally, career role models included African-American women who were modeling a chosen career field.

Secondary role models, peers and education professionals, also influenced educational expectation. Peers commanded a strong influence on academic achievement (Mickelson, 1990) and social modeling (Bank et al., 1990). Cross-race and cross-gender friendships influenced the expectations for higher education in subgroups of peers (Hallinan & Williams, 1990).

Community and religious leaders or mentors, as tertiary role models, possessed less influence, yet were beneficial in career orientation (Zunker, 1984) and academic or social integration (Bank et al, 1990). Wharton (1986) suggested that members of the African-American community turn to the resources that had never failed them - the historic biracial community coalitions for support.

The cultural model of growth and development for African-American females, as described by Harris (1992), involved assessment of life experiences in the senses of belonging, identity, and control. This Afrocentric model was based on the culture, history, and tradition of

African-American females. Childhood experiences, family relationships, community involvement, and spirituality were facets of life that develop the cultural precept of interdependence or familial attachment necessary for a healthy sense of belonging (Harris, 1992). Trent (1984) and Eisenhart (1981) observed this interdependence as career aspirations of a large percentage of African-American females were clustered in areas that provided services for the African-American community.

A sense of identity described the perception one possessed of self and others (Harris, 1992). Awareness of self led to the realization of membership within the ethno-racial group and culminated in the defining of self through the reference of the Afrikan world view (Semaj, 1985). These collective experiences with family, peers, and community served to insulate the individual from negative external cues of race or gender discrimination and depicted individual effort or achievement as a reflection of family or community success (Washington, Gordon, & Armour-Thomas, 1989).

A sense of control within the growth and development model of African-American females included the cultural precepts of cooperation and synergy. "When African-American females believe their behaviors control their experiences and these beliefs are reinforced by their families and community, they are more likely to experience a sense of control" (Harris, 1992, p. 160). This sense of control was developed through a cooperative effort within the family where ethnic pride and self-development were fostered (Washington et. al., 1989), racism and sexism were confronted, and goal setting and academic achievement were supported (Higginbotham, 1985; Mickelson, 1990).

The growth and development of the African-American female in the areas of belonging, identity, and control (Harris, 1992) play a major role in the acquisition of an intact sense of selfhood. The African-American woman is depicted as familial, community oriented, and often unprepared for discrimination which increases the likelihood of facing double discrimination in education and the workplace (Beale, 1970; Evans & Herr, 1991).

African-American females possess an ethnic collective sense of self (Brown, 1993; Harris, 1992; Turner, 1983) which is closely tied to the perceptions and expectations of others (Wharton, 1986). Relationships and networking among these women are more important than autonomy or

individualism (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brown, 1993). Familial and social relationships impact the self image of African-American woman (Brown, 1993). Incidents of detachment from significant family members produce a detrimental influence on the African-American woman's self image. The development of a sense of sisterhood, or being socially compatible with other African-American women, is essential to networking which supports the positive social self image (Brown, 1993).

The development of the African-American woman's value system originated from her African cultural heritage, strong religious beliefs, care giver roles (Rodgers-Rose, 1980), and the recognition of need for mutual aid with one another (McCray, 1980). African-American women placed great value on marriage, the family unit, kinship bonds, and responsibility to extended family. They fulfilled whatever roles were essential for survival of the community (McCray, 1980). The roles performed by African-American women were historic roles in which the woman was neither subordinate nor dominant, but an equal partner in policy making and privileges (McAdoo, 1988).

Improving academic achievement among minority students requires enhancement of the self image (Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, & Christensen, 1992; Sedlack & Webster, 1978), specialized academic programming and counseling services (Locke & Faubert, 1993), exploration of an ethnic identity (Kerr, et al., 1992), assistance with developing family awareness and support (Dawkins, 1989), and excellence in attitude (Cargile & Woods, 1988).

Education has been illuminated as the keystone to progress (Wharton, 1986), the institution that could lift African-American people from poverty and oppression (Mickelson, 1990), and essential to the American Dream (Hodgkinson, 1985). This historic and prevailing attitude among members of the African-American community produced doubt, indifference, apathy, and cynicism toward schooling and higher learning (Wharton, 1986) as many members of this ethnic group have not attained this dream.

Academic preparedness and performance remained a major deterrent to finding success in college for African-American students (Cargile & Woods, 1988; Hodgkinson, 1985; 1988; Wharton, 1986). Inferior or inadequate academic preparation (Cargile & Woods, 1988), vocational rather than college preparatory curriculum, and an institutionally condoned

development of a failure attitude (Wharton, 1986) contributed to this lack of success. As trends for academic preparedness increased within the high school curriculum, African-American students were identified as taking fewer of the required college preparatory courses. They sacrificed college preparatory opportunity for business, general math, and science core curriculums (Cargile & Woods, 1988). As requirements for college entrance increased, African-American students were lagging behind their Caucasian peers.

Research illustrates preparedness in academic arenas, counseling and guidance services, and involvement as beneficial to the educational experiences of students (Cargile & Woods, 1988; Credle & Dean, 1991). Additionally, educational success is enhanced with increased mentoring opportunities and social support (Kemp, 1990; Locke & Faubert, 1993; Ogbu, 1990). Yet, research overlooks the exploration of support systems or factors influencing female minority student's educational aspiration, achievement, or enrollment in higher education.

The primary intent of this study was to explore, understand, and describe support systems of aspiration among African-American females for post high school education. Utilization of qualitative research methodology and longitudinal interview techniques allowed the young women to express understandings and perceptions in their own words. Phenomena guided the exploration of the emergent, inductive study. The researcher, immersed in the investigation of the phenomena, endeavored to remain open to understanding. Initial interest focused on characteristics of support in the areas of familial assistance, academic preparation, college and career counseling, and self image issues. Research generated a grounded theory of educational aspiration supporting African-American females.

## Methodology

This research study employed a qualitative research paradigm to explore and describe support for educational aspiration among African-American females. The purpose was to generate, from personal perspectives, an understanding of the context of each African-American young woman's personal and educational experiences. The research process endeavored to explore the questions: (1) What are the support systems for African-American females aspiring to college? (2) How do these systems or factors support the aspiration of college attendance?

### Setting

The metropolitan geographical area in which this public school district lies is home to five hundred thousand people (P. Jesse, personal communication, November 8, 1993). The public school district participates in a court ordered busing plan to reduce segregation and increase opportunity for its students. African-American students comprise approximately 29% of the student body within this public school district (C. Noerrlinger, personal communication, November 8, 1993).

The district resides in a midwestern state which was once noted for agriculture and agricultural processing occupations. The scope of this study investigated African-American young women within the boundaries of this school district. Limitations occurred due to purposive sampling from one school district with its prevailing educational philosophy and geographical location within the country.

Following permission from the Central Office of Research and Community-Human Resource Services, the study was conducted within a large midwestern school district. The school district required that all participants be selected at the onset of the study. Students from each of the seven high schools were eligible to participate. Each high school represented ethnic and socioeconomic diversity as school choice was advocated within the district.

Subject Selection

The college/career counselor from each high school was contacted and requested to present a list of possible students interested in the study. Each school selected three African-American women, enrolled as juniors, who had expressed an aspiration for college education. Aspiration was described as verbal communication with the counselor or participation in college preparatory classes. One of the seven schools selected an additional student as an alternate.

An informational meeting was held and assent/consent forms as well as a letter describing the research study were distributed. Four personal interviews were conducted throughout the study with each student. Questions from the first interview elicited demographic information and some initial thoughts regarding support for educational aspiration. Subsequent interview questions were formulated from data gained in previous interviews.

Twenty-one students gave permission to participate. The study began in the junior year of high school and continued through graduation and the fall enrollment period in college. Three

students did not complete the research study. A total of 76 interviews was conducted throughout the twenty-month period. The young women were paid a stipend for the interviews and a culminating summary critique.

Loss of students in the study occurred in three distinct situations. Withdrawal of permission from one young woman appeared to have little or no effect on the remainder of the students within the study. The situations involving the loss of two other young women [abuse and separation, death] were critical incidents that have been and continued to be addressed with several students throughout the duration of the study.

Interview Process

Interview appointments were scheduled for each young woman through her high school counselor. Interviews were conducted in private offices of school counselors or the school lounge when it could be scheduled. The initial interview with the young women was highly structured and focused. The initial procedures for verification were as follows: (1) interview tapes were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the researcher for correctness of speech patterns and ideas, (2) a copy of the transcription, when completed, was delivered to each young woman at her high school for the purpose of review and verification, (3) each student was given two weeks to provide additional input regarding the open-ended statements, questions, or responses on the transcription, and, (4) upon return of the transcriptions or following the allotted time period, analysis of the text of the interviews began.

## Results

Grounded theory research methodology was implemented, and research data was analyzed utilizing the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analysis of the third and fourth interviews was assisted by utilization of a computer text analysis program titled, Textbase Alpha (Tesch, Sommerland, & Kristensen, 1989). The researcher acknowledged personal bias and allowed the emergence of the data forming themes and categories from each interview. Interview One revealed role models (family), self image, church affiliation, and a strong sense of spirit as major themes. Interview Two expanded the categories of self image and role models while reviewing sources of support (educational, involvement, and financial). Interview Three fully developed the impact of selfhood on aspiration

and further expanded the themes of role models and preparedness (educational, involvement). Interview Four provided somewhat of a forum for the young women to describe their understanding of what should be done to support African-American female students. They offered personal recommendations and validation of previous information. Interview texts and emerging themes were reviewed and verified by the young women participating in the study.

Verification of data and theory was validated through utilization of methodology to enhance credibility, define consistency, and ensure transferability (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Triangulation of the data, member checks, peer examination, and disclosure of researcher bias were employed to enhance credibility (Merriam, 1988). Defining consistency required the researcher to disclose intent, to triangulate data collection and analysis procedures, and to thoroughly describe an audit trail(Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 1988). Interview focus, question and theme development, category expansion or saturation, and the development of a theory of educational aspiration (Merriam, 1988) ensured transferability. An audit of the study was conducted as an additional means of verifying research findings.

Data analysis procedures generated three theoretical propositions. These propositions ultimately were woven into a tapestry of the phenomenon of aspiration. The theoretical propositions which emerged during this study of African-American female students were:

Theoretical proposition I posited that the educational aspiration of African-American female students is influenced by role models, their hierarchy and their educational or career success,

Theoretical proposition II posited that the educational aspiration of African-American female students is supported by a realization of selfhood which includes growth and development, self image issues, and a personal decision making process, and

Theoretical proposition III posited that the educational aspiration of African-American female students is promoted by preparedness which includes academic preparedness, college and career counseling services, and involvement.

Theoretical proposition I described the influence of role models. These African-American young women related their meaning of role model as "someone to look up to," "someone that has set a good example," "someone that has been through hard times, didn't give up, succeeded in life," or "someone who's doing something you might want to follow, pattern your life after." The

personal qualities of these role models mirrored those of the young women regarding qualities and attributes necessary to be successful in their educational aspirations.

## Discussion

Role models identified by the young women included immediate family members, educational and peer relationships, and community leaders. These individuals were described as primary, secondary, and tertiary role models. For aspiration to be sustained, these young women required familial support from immediate and extended family members, educational and social relationships that promoted academic preparedness and opportunity, and a community base that advocated diverse aspirations for higher education.

Primary role models were most often characterized in past research (Turner, 1983), and confirmed within this study, as female and immediate family members. These young women depicted mom, aunt, and grandmother as primary role models describing them as "always [being] there," "easy to talk to," "listen[ing] to what you have to say," or "the main person who could understand me." Another young women depicted a strong role model as "I wanted to be like my aunt __...and I always wanted to be like her....cause she was a strong, Black woman...and she went to college. Not too many people in my family had been to college." The contributions of primary role models were related to the family or self image as "she took care of me" or "we'd always go out and she really knew how to handle herself." These young women portrayed a sense of sisterhood among familial females and a collaborative or communal decision making process.

Primary role models had overcome adverse situations or been successful in attaining what they set out to do. They assisted with and provided affirmation of decision making. Primary role models aided educational focus by encouraging these young women to explore areas of interest and become involved in diverse activities.

The majority of parental primary role models lived in a traditional nuclear family, had attended an institution of higher learning, and practiced a service or semi-professional occupation. One young woman, reflecting upon the lack of success of others, spoke of family support as

> it's because they don't have the kind of support maybe that I have and not only at home, but at school, too. Maybe if they had started off feeling good with that kind of support, then maybe they could have,

you know, do the same things I do.

She went on to say that "backing" gave her the "juice" to succeed.

Secondary role models were described as peers or educational professionals [counselors and teachers]. The influence of peers ranged from positive to negative. Negative peer influences were said to "hold you back" or to breed indecision due to the dissimilarities in educational aspiration. One young woman recalled her grandmother's advice as warning "don't be unevenly yoked" with friends that will keep you from your goals.

Peers also provided positive support. One young woman described peer support as making the difference in her decision to stay in school when she learned she was pregnant. Another young woman spoke of peer support that followed her even though the peer had moved away to another state. Still another related the necessity of African-American peer support when attending college...colleges without a strong minority base were at a disadvantage.

Selecting peers "going on the same path" or "headed in the same direction" with "a similar focus" was important to these young women. These peers affirmed decisions regarding classwork and planning, motivated others to "keep on task," and were goal oriented toward higher education. Several students also spoke of how they participated in a cycle of support or mentoring for peers: they supported their same-aged peers who were going through similar experiences at present, discussed ideas, concerns, and strategies with college-aged peers, and instructed younger students about how to get prepared.

Counselors and educators were described as "know[ing] all this stuff," "willing to help," and "down to earth." Being confidential, affirming classwork and decisions, and making that extra effort for students qualified these educational professionals as role models. Building relationships with counselors and educators supported educational aspiration for these young women. As one young woman remarked, "Me and my counselor are really good friends, and she does a lot of things for me."

Counselors were described as open-minded and approachable. They furnished information for class planning, college planning, and scholarship applications. One young woman stated, "Everything that I needed to know, she always informed me." Counselors provided guidance in personal as well as school or career areas. They were mentors.

Several young women depicted educators as influential people in their lives. One young woman characterized her teacher as "like on a personal basis with, like, every single student, you know. I was just like, wow, she must be really nice to just get along with everybody, you know." Another described her teacher as "nice, pretty, she was sweet. She was practically nice to everyone. She had a good attitude, she was never upset or mad about anything." Still another young woman reflected, "I wanted to be like her so much. She was just the nicest person I think I ever had in my whole school. She was the only person I'll never forget."

Career mentors, community leaders, or religious leaders were described as tertiary role models. These role models were described as "setting a standard," helping the student stay focused, and providing valuable personal information and insight regarding college or career planning. One young woman remarked, "They tell me I'm a bright person."

Career mentors were said to set examples in their particular career field. Community and religious leaders were described as being supportive in the decision making process. Several young women felt that these individuals portrayed a significant role in affirming their educational endeavors.

The role models [primary, secondary, and tertiary] of these young women impacted and affirmed their decision-making process. The educational, occupational, and community involvement of role models served as an example for the young women to emulate. The successful experiences of role models supported the young women's aspirations for higher education.

The primary role models provided the greatest influence, yet, the secondary and tertiary role models were interchanged when crisis or need arose. Effective interaction of role models was collaborative and focused upon increasing networking. Research (Bank et al., 1990; Credle & Dean, 1991; Dawkins, 1989; Hallinan & Williams, 1990) demonstrated that role models influenced choice and retention, but did not describe the interactionary relationship depicted in the present data.

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Theoretical proposition II describes the support of selfhood which includes growth and development, self image issues, and a personal decision-making process. As with the first theoretical proposition, the greatest support of aspiration was realized when each of these areas integrated with one another. Growth and development of African-American females were composed of a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, and a sense of control (Harris, 1992). Belonging included the precepts of interdependence and connectedness among African-American women. The young women in the study illustrated belonging by describing childhood or memorable experiences. These poignant experiences, although sometimes negative, occurred with family members and, very often, with primary role models.

Collectivism, or perceived membership, and the perception one possesses of self and others were the precepts explored in the area of identity (Harris, 1992; Brown, 1993). The young women described childhood idols and influential people who mirrored their personal or career role models. They had been given advice, that as women, "you can do anything you want to do," or "you have a lot of opportunities ahead," or "it's like two strikes against me [Black and female], what I have to do is break those barriers and get around that." Advice regarding men was not often as favorable due to familial experiences. These young women were encouraged to "trust yourself before you can trust them" and "don't back down to them."

One young woman stated,

> Most of the females that I've grown up with are the African-American females, and because of our family background, we're more, we're very much rooted in reality, just because we know, we see what happened, and what could happen again. So we're more out for getting ourselves established,...getting a job, getting a good paycheck, and we know that's what has to be done, and we're gonna find a way to do it.

Synergy, or collective decision making, and cooperation described the precepts of locus of control (Harris, 1992). Preparedness and understanding of discrimination became a key in determining the African-American woman's locus of control (Beale, 1970; Evans & Herr, 1991). Gender discrimination was not as apparent as was racism in the experiences of the young women in the study. Most of the young women felt that experiences of racism had increased in number

and had become more overt as they got older. Those young women, less prepared for these experiences, expressed surprise and confusion. Those with a personal understanding of racism chose to deal with the situation as the other person's problem, "I was always taught that people who were racist, it wasn't entirely their fault, that they were ignorant." The prevailing attitude was "as long as I love myself, I'm all right." Approval from racist people was not considered necessary for the continued existence and success of these young women.

These descriptions attempt to illustrate that the young women report confidence within themselves as people. Racist attitudes may impact their life's events, but many have chosen to deal with it as the other person's problem. As a group, they appear to react to it as a challenge to their success, one which they report that they can handle.

"Think highly of yourself...work hard," was the advice given by the young women in addressing personal qualities. Hard working, caring, and friendly were terms utilized by these young women to describe academic and personal behavioral qualities that they possessed. Negative personal qualities, when identified, preceded a discussion on the young woman's attempts to alleviate or eliminate them. Discussion focused on the integrative importance of social as well as academic personal qualities in supporting educational aspirations.

An attitude of self-respect, self-motivation, and focus emerged from the interview discussions. One young woman related pride in herself by saying, "No one can really say anything negative about me as far as the things I've done or said. I've always tried to carry myself in a mature way." Many of the young women advocated this attitude so that others could view a positive role model for African-American women.

Personal experiences, media attention to problems with African-American female teens, and disfavorable generalizations of this particular subgroup provided the impetus for self motivation. One young woman spoke of not "set[ting] any boundaries," or not "limit[ing] myself because I'm a female."

Focus was described as "keeping your head screwed on straight" and "not goofing off." It maintained one's motivation and bolstered one's self-respect. Focus meant keeping "involved in activities" with peers "that were going where you are." Focus supported achieving one's goal of educational aspiration.

Goals addressed related to personal or social areas, learning, and career interests. The majority of students specifically described strong personal relationships and family living as important. One young woman remarked, "I'll need support from my family. I want them to say, I want you to go to college, I want you to do that for yourself, Sugar. I want you to be somebody." Another stated, "My dad, he's always by my side." Several young women were interested in obtaining status as some spoke of building "my own house and furnish[ing] it," owning fancy cars, or being "rich."

Education was very important to all of the students. All were aspiring to high school graduation and college attendance, "I would love to further my education." Several spoke of the expectations that parents possessed, "They [parents] have really high expectations, I do it [work hard at school] for myself." The young women realized that this meant a commitment to good grades, involvement in school and community, educational planning, and effective decision making. Focusing on goals supported students in their aspiration for college.

These young women possessed career interests in the areas of medicine, law, business, and education. Gaining responsibility and affirmation within their chosen career field was an aspiration for most of the students. Careers selected were areas of interest that also would provide for a family or benefit the community. With that benefit, personal or social goals of personal relationships and family life would be enhanced.

The majority of the students in the study reported utilizing a formalized decision making process. The young women described a pro or con system which related to the success or failure of past decisions and the future option of preventing such errors. Personal experiences that were related to the researcher advocated discussing decisions with other individuals, specifically primary role models. "The counselor is basically there. I know your parents are always there, if they're not, get another person that you think you can talk to. Talk to them. If you have a real close friend, talk to them." These young women utilized collaborative communication extensively during their decision making process.

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Theoretical proposition III described aspiration as promoted by preparedness, which includes academic preparedness, college and career counseling services, and involvement. Academic preparedness was described as including the GPA, educational planning, and career planning. Students reported grades as average or above stating, "They're pretty good," "good," or "grades are okay." Those young women disclosing specific grade point averages had averages ranging from 2.55 to above 4.0. Many young women were astonished to realize the significance of a GPA in college requirements. As one young woman commented,

> Junior year, I did really well, but it couldn't make up for both of those years [freshmen and sophomore] and no matter how well I do this year, my GPA is still gonna reflect what happened freshmen and sophomore year.

The young women reported a wide range of subject interests and varied study habits. The comments regarding study habits ranged from it "...needs work" to "...gets done." Several students devised a plan of action for studying at a specific time of day or in a specific manner.

Determining a college preparatory program, selecting academic enrichment activities, and improving study skills comprised appropriate educational planning. These young women found that inadequate planning limited challenging educational experiences that equipped them for college and the future. The young women agreed that classwork should illustrate "your best" effort and always "be on time."

Career planning reflected educational planning. The young women felt that determination of a major or career interest, discussion of college programs and requirements, and possible selection of a college should begin the freshmen year of high school, which is earlier than most of them had started. Many of the young women sensed that planning and preparedness reduced pressure, increased balance, and supported their focus of educational aspiration.

College and career counseling services focused upon information, relationship, and mentoring. Students reported counseling and guidance services that offered in-class presentations on college preparatory requirements, invited students to college visitations, taught students how to utilize resources available in the career center, and encouraged counselor-student interaction. Counselors kept students "informed on things." One young woman stated that her counselor "would have a bulletin where it posted new scholarships that were in the counseling center, all

you have to do is come in the counseling center and look it up."

Counselor-student interaction was considered by the young women to be the most critical factor in determining the success of the college and career counseling services. Actual contact with counselors varied by student, yet most of the young women indicated that building a relationship with one's counselor provided education and personal support. One young woman reflected on this relationship, "Every time I wanted to know something, I would go down to her....Cause, my counselor, she was like a second parent or something. I really talked to her a lot."

Mentoring endeavors employed by counselors ranged from knowing the needs and aspirations of each individual student to providing small group support. Individual mentoring allowed each student to gain access to scholarships, community mentoring opportunities, or summer mentoring programs that mirrored their interests and abilities. Group mentoring activities provided access to other young women for affirmation of decisions, efforts, and a communal or collaborative cycle of support.

Involvement included extra curricular activities at school, church, or in the community. The young women remarked that they "...had a full schedule," "...[were] spread thin," or "...always busy, never sitting around." The majority of the young women were involved with several activities within the school setting. Approximately one-third of the students reported being involved in community activities including NAACP Youth Council, Octagon Club, or GOARC. One-fourth of the young women described church activities as being important. One student commented, "The special clubs....build character and leadership." Another student felt that "it helped to be involved in a lot of stuff, cause I was always busy and never bored." She had little time to waste or get into trouble, if she planned to obtain good grades.

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## Recommendations and Conclusions

The theory generated in this study presented insight and understanding to a phenomenon that largely had been overlooked. This research was conducted with educational institutions in mind,

therefore, the researcher was interested in the reforms or adaptations that would enhance the African-American young women's experiences and support aspirations within the school setting. The data and the young women offered recommendations. These recommendations have been provided for counselors, educators, the community, college institutions, parents, and students. The recommendations included that (1) counselors provide networking among peers - educators - counselors - parents - community mentors, group support, and mentoring, (2) educators become more approachable, support talents, aspirations, provide opportunity, (3) the community provide role models and more support for diverse aspirations, (4) college institutions provide mentoring programs which include a collaborative, group-centered orientation, (5) parents should work to involve schools with the home [primary role models] as well as the community [secondary and tertiary role models], and, (6) students should begin their educational and career exploration as a high school freshman. Additionally, these recommendations substantiated strategies outlined in previous research as noted.

Counselors.

Students expressed a desire "to have a relationship with one of the counselors. Somebody you can talk to." They hoped that they would be open-minded and provide feedback regarding classes and educational or career opportunities. The relationship with the counselor became the foundation to the success of counseling and guidance information and services.

Other students requested information from the counselor. "A little communication would have been a lot more helpful," was the recommendation from one young woman. Information regarding "harder classes," counseling procedures, and college or career information was suggested. Several students expressed a desire to have information about Black colleges since they felt that present high school career centers were lacking in that area. "I think their African-American college section is kinda weak. I tried, when I have boxes of stuff that colleges have sent me at home, so I just brought it all up here and told them they could use it in the career center."

Many of the young women communicated a need for small group guidance activities. Classes on positive self image, confidence builders, or "just a talk session" would have been appreciated. A group where anything could be said and "you'd know when nothing else would get out" was

deemed valuable. Several young women described a small group seminar, Advisement, as an example of a beneficial small group program in one high school that began with freshmen and continued through the senior year. Collaborative or communal activities with peers and a leader provided support for these young women (Frost, 1991; Harris, 1992; Locke & Faubert, 1993).

Educators.

Students recommended that educators also develop a relationship with the students. Those with educator relationships felt supported and affirmed (Levine & Eubanks, 1990). One young woman remarked, "I feel there are some very supportive, very helpful teachers. And, um, I just, the teachers are great and have motivated me a lot."

Others requested more understanding, greater opportunity "to prove themselves," a request for openness, and a "fair chance." Students suggested that teachers "should find better ways to teach students because, you know, I think that is part of your job. Make it interesting." They didn't find pencil and paper tasks exciting and stimulating (Levine & Eubanks, 1990; Turner, 1983).

Community.

The community was charged with "find[ing] mentors from the community and bring[ing] them in [to school]." This was recommended so African-American young women would see that "there are successful African-American females out there," "before they [young women] lose their focus." The young women asked community leaders to be accessible for advice and to support diverse aspirations and career goals (Cargile & Woods, 1988; Credle & Dean, 1991).

College Institutions.

College institutions were requested to provide additional information to high school career centers for students. Black colleges, especially, were noted for providing little access to information. One young woman stated, "I think, for Black students, we need, I mean, because a lot of Black kids do want to go to Black colleges, and there is just no information."

Students felt that colleges should realize racism may become a factor in college choice. One young woman voiced her concern following a college visit to a major state university when, "__ has it problems, especially with a lot of institutional racism...the fact that there is not a lot of Blacks there. And they don't see who they can interact with." This reality becomes a viable reason to select another college or university for enrollment.

Students suggested that colleges should provide group-oriented support for minority students and college student mentors to speak with high school students about life in college (Credle & Dean, 1991; Robinson, 1990). These activities allowed students an understanding of the demands of college, the opportunity to develop strategies with those possessing similar life events, and rich educational experiences (Kerr et al., 1992). Peer mentoring provided social support and decision making benefits within the discussions of these women.

Parents.

Parental responsibility in supporting a student's aspiration was described in several ways. One young woman expressed the responsibility of parents in supporting the student as,

> to always encourage the child to, um, want to learn. Cause in some households, it's like, they come home from work. How you doing? Fine. How you like this? They don't ask about their schoolwork, don't ask about how school was, don't sit down and look at their work or help them with their homework anymore.

Other young women depicted parents as fulfilling a major role in the support of education. The students discussed the necessity of talking to their family members and being glad that they "helped you. I mean, they discipline you to do homework and stuff." Another young woman felt that "just being there" was important. Still another spoke of parents being proud of your accomplishments. Parental expectations have great impact on the aspiration and motivation of these young women to achieve their goals of higher education (Bank et al., 1990; Dawkins, 1989; Harris, 1992).

Students.

Recommendations for students included, "get to know [your] counselor really well," "get involved and keep the grades up," and "try to find a balance between activities and grades." Most of the young women agreed that students should start early and should not wait until the senior year to prepare for college and career interests (Jackson, 1993). They suggested that focus, information, and advice would assist with supporting aspiration for higher education.

Increasing networking, understanding and promoting awareness of selfhood, forming relationships with school and community professionals, and exploring educational and career opportunities early are recommendations of this study. The networking among home, school, and

community will provide broad-based opportunity, support talents and diverse aspirations, and promote career appropriate role models as mentors. The awareness of African-American female selfhood as collaborative and communal rather than individual will assist educators and institutions with implementing services, programs, and mentoring opportunities of greater benefit to these students. Forming relationships with professionals who are open-minded, approachable, and strive to implement innovative teaching techniques provides a base of support within the educational community. Exploring educational and career opportunities early increases information on class offerings and mentoring activities, provides exposure to college requirements and institutional information, and promotes opportunities for group interaction among peers and mentors.

This study began with questions exploring support necessary for post high school education among African-American female students. The questions asked how these young women supported their desire for education and how these systems supported that aspiration. This exploration regarding support systems of educational aspiration among African-American females was unique as it had not been addressed.

This researcher learned that aspiration is a difficult phenomenon to define as it is based in each young woman's experience and context. The data, however, described similarities regarding the influence of role models, possessing an understanding of who you are - selfhood, and participation in academic, college and career counseling services, or community activities to define preparedness. The researcher learned that this model must be integrated; that is, each area of role models, selfhood, and preparedness must interact with the other areas. This is not to presume that a young African-American woman who possessed only preparedness would not get to college. This research indicated that her chances were increased if all areas of the model were intact and integrative. The theory generated from this research regarding support systems of educational aspiration may be applicable and appropriate for implementation with urban, midwestern African-American females.

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insert figure four here

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The present research describes African-American females as participating in a communal, rather than individual, and collateral, rather than lineal, decision-making process. This insight suggests a conflict with current public education practice, policy, and procedure. Our public education system esteems individual effort and lineal decision making while only acknowledging efforts aimed at cooperative education and communal decision making. This research indicates that these individual and lineal aspects in public education are detrimental to the efforts of African-American females in aspiring to higher education.

Several areas of information escaped definition and description since it was difficult to account for those young African-American women who fulfilled their aspiration in spite of not possessing intact parts of the model. Extensive research into any of the major propositions generated from this data would yield greater insights to this population. Further investigation of the hierarchy of role models, issues of selfhood, or aspects of preparedness would encompass an extremely interesting and beneficial project.

Additional research projects could 1) explore patterns of a collaborative decision making system utilized by many African-American females, 2) investigate the effectiveness of role model interaction and integration regarding educational and occupational choices, 3) focus on clarifying the integrative aspects of selfhood, 4) examine the role of involvement in preparedness, and 5) describe possible alternative educational practice based on a collaborative or group centered model.

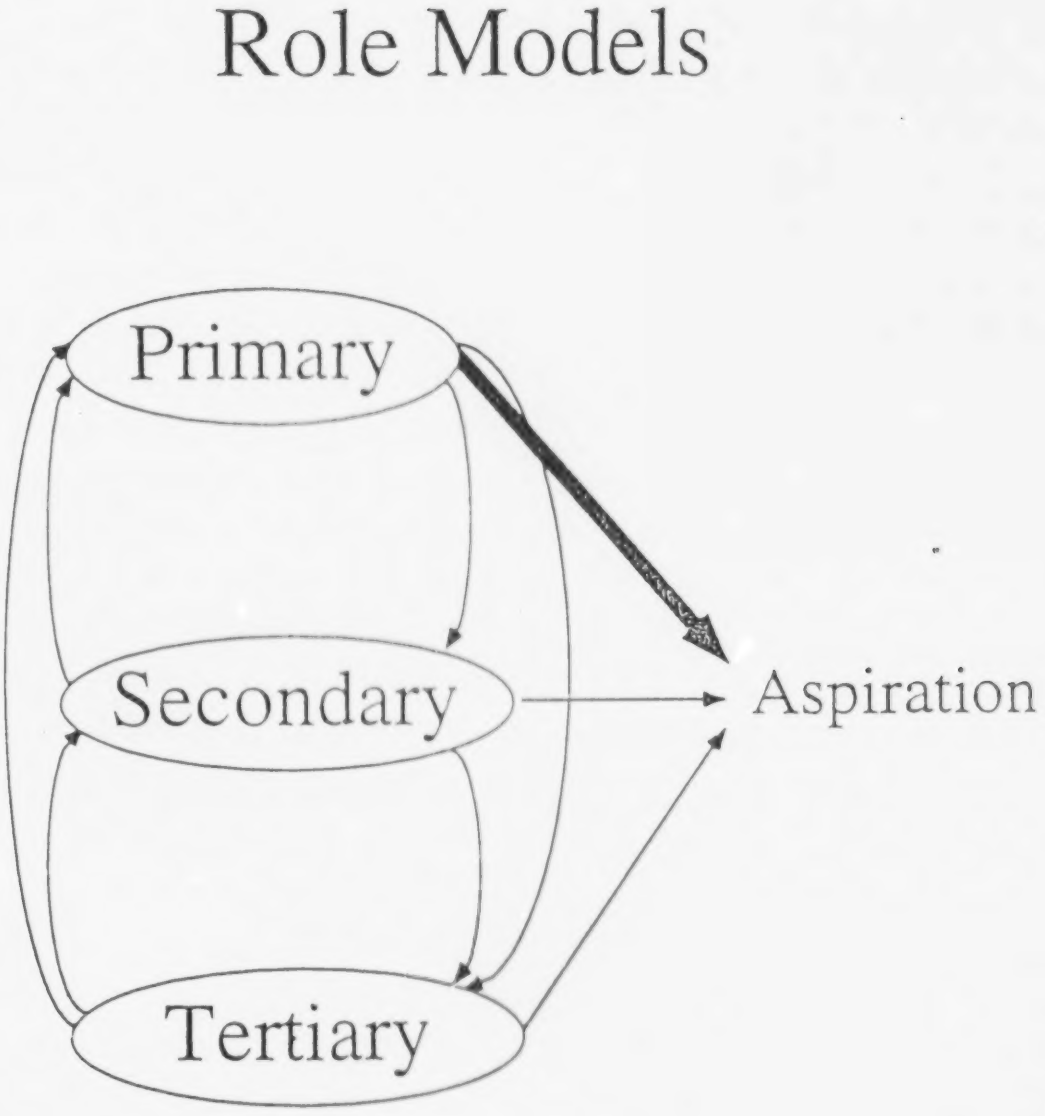


Fig. 1 The influence of role models on educational aspiration.

# Selfhood

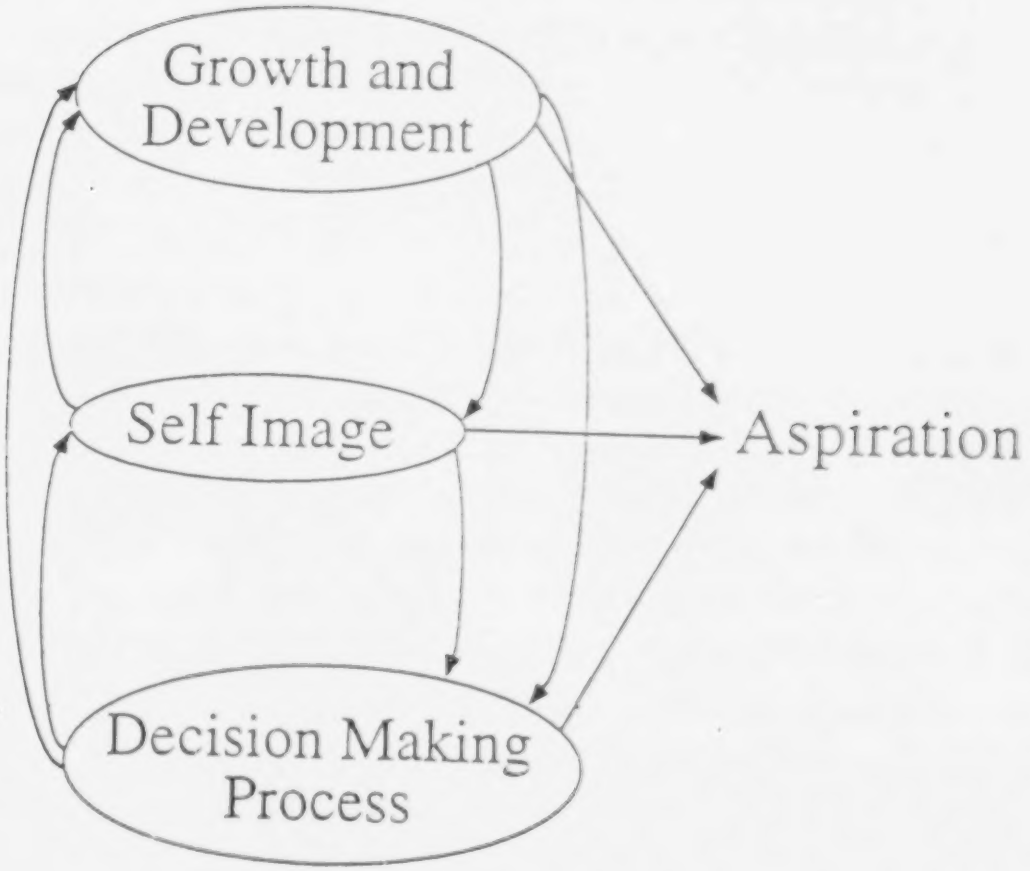


Fig. 2 The impact of selfhood on educational aspiration.

# Preparedness

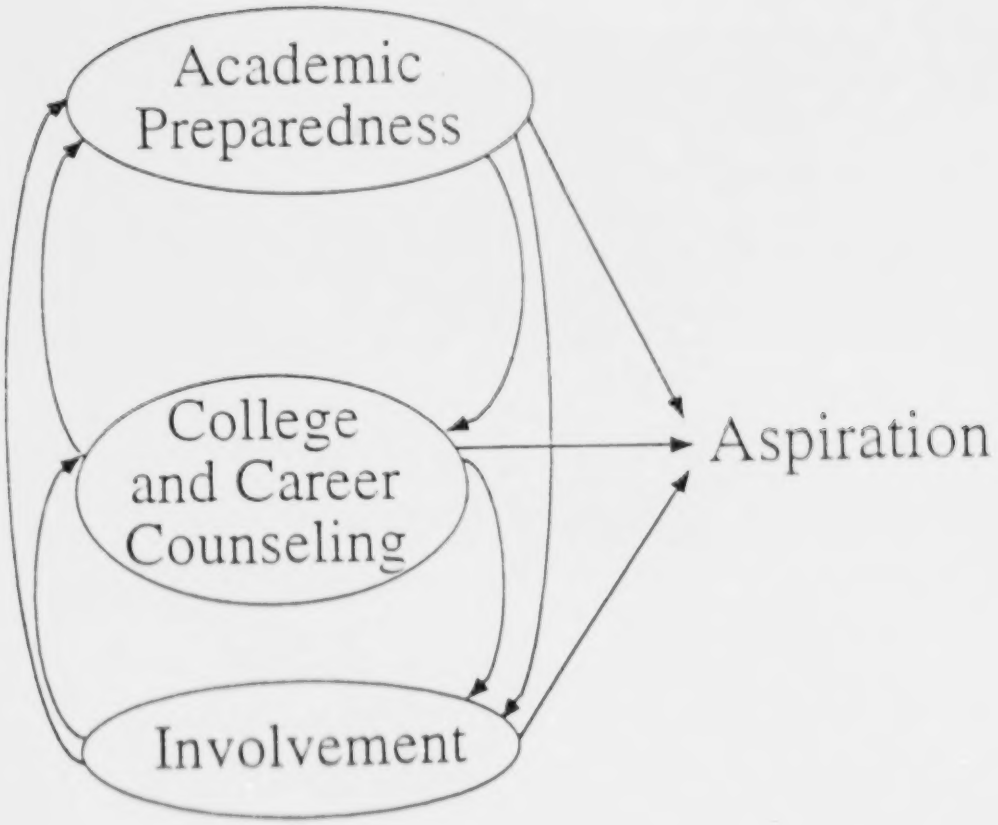


Fig. 3 The influence of preparedness on educational aspiration.

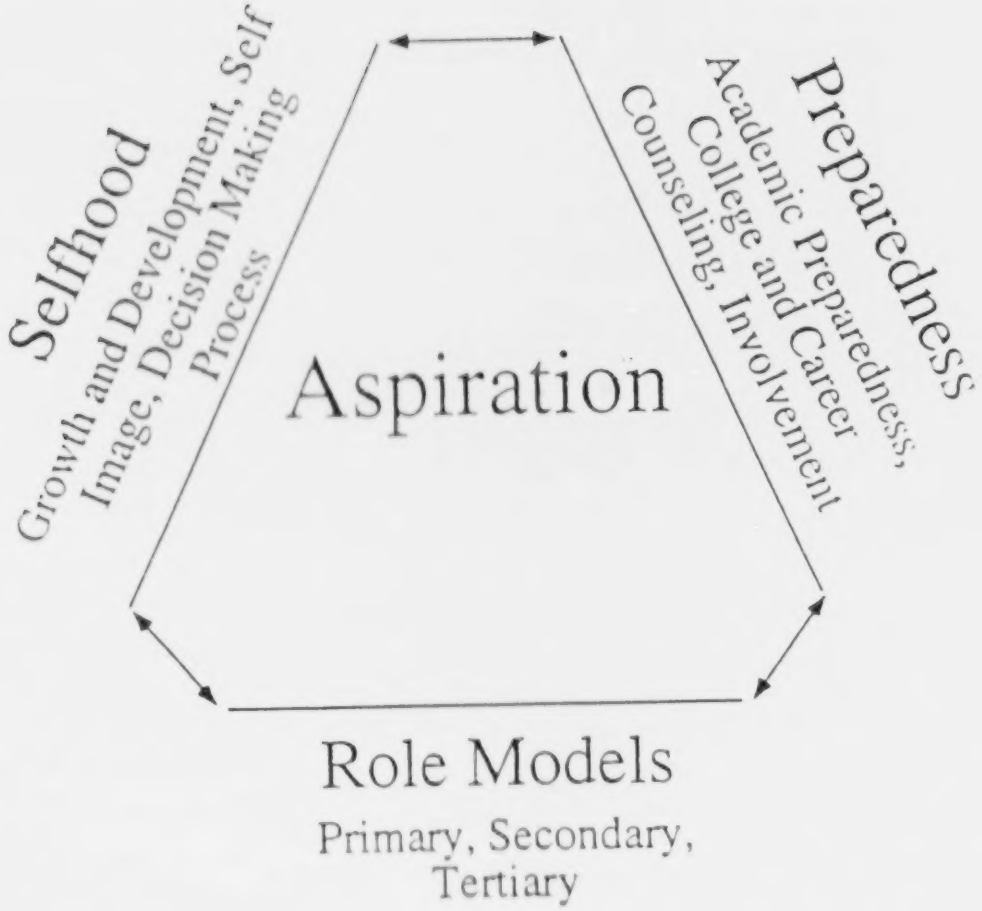


**Fig. 4 An integrated model of support systems for educational aspiration.**

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